

Coulter Faculty Center

Western Carolina University

Renaissance of Teaching and Learning



Wisdom Lost and Being Found: Teaching & Learning as Personal and Public

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Booklet Four

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The Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series is a publication of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning at Western Carolina University. The Series is intended to stimulate and support both scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching & learning by drawing contemplative attention to various aspects of the methods, goals and visions of teaching and creating learning opportunities with students.

Through their experience and wisdom about learning, the writers in the Series want to open a continuous dialogue among colleagues about the always ancient, always new profession of teaching. If the Series acts as a catalyst for a new renaissance of teaching & learning at WCU, it will be serving its purpose.

Alan Altany, Editor

Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series
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Wisdom Lost and Being Found: Teaching & Learning as Personal and Public

“Where is the knowledge we have lost in information; where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?” — (T.S. Eliot)

Premise and Problems: Wisdom Being Kept Secret and Lost

Is beauty or goodness an object to be privately possessed? Can creativity flourish in strenuous isolation? Each day, month and year wisdom about teaching and learning is regularly and steadily lost in and to academic communities, not only through retirement or changing of careers by experienced, wizened and wise faculty, but through the privatization of teaching and an academic culture that continues to keep the doors closed on teaching out of fear, or an odd view of academic freedom, or a sense of competition with colleagues for pay, awards, rewards, etc. While on the one hand, college faculty can proclaim the centrality of teaching for the academic profession and for its civic, moral and intellectual significance, on the other hand, academic culture's reluctance to open the doors to teaching and learning as community events seems to almost marginalize that very teaching.

College faculty have a deep lode of wisdom about themselves, teaching and learning with students, the ups and downs of an academic career, teaching failures, experimentations and breakthroughs, but much of that wisdom is lost or unavailable to colleagues. The more academic culture does not regenerate its vision of itself through the almost shamanistic leadership of wise faculty, the more opportunities faculty miss learning about teaching in a deeply enjoyable and transformative way.

The wisdom I am speaking about is rooted in experience, grounded in hard work, fertilized by contemplative action and integrated by imagination. It is the wisdom that has the insight to place teaching within the overall human context and story and has the understanding that education is both a value and that it requires the development of values, character and an awareness of one's awareness and identity. In this light, excellent teaching is a gradual lessening of one's ego and becoming more transparent to the

learning itself and to the eyes of the students. As is said in the *Tao Te Ching*, "I have only three things to teach: patience, simplicity, compassion."

If the professoriate is to be deeply respected in contemporary culture, wisdom about teaching and learning can no longer be kept secret from colleagues and professional development needs to focus not only upon the content of one's discipline, but upon the scholarship about teaching and learning and the teaching of one's discipline.

The problem is that college teaching is a profession that has sometimes forgotten to profess its very spirit in such a way as to create genuinely collegial academic communities instead of isolated professionals who are not aware of the teaching experiments and research, values, methods and results of their own colleagues, perhaps even those in nearby offices. For example, graduate students learn disciplinary content, but not often enough how to best teach that content for critical and creative learning to occur among students. It almost seems that a common assumption has been that good teaching will automatically occur if one has sufficient disciplinary knowledge and engages in disciplinary scholarship, or that good teaching is simply an innate ability some have and some do not. The professoriate is thus diminished. What other profession could operate in such a way and still claim respect for itself and from others?

As a professor and as a faculty developer, I interpret the loss of wisdom as a result of an academic inertia that holds to the familiar and relatively safe. However, factors such as the push for the discerning use of educational technologies and external forces demanding learning outcomes accountability are gradually making the failure to create and sustain collegial academic communities for teaching and learning more apparent and untenable. Paradoxically, such external pressures, welcomed or not, are serving as an impetus for a new focus upon professional development that features the goal of excellence in teaching and learning. The very emergence of faculty centers on campuses is one sign of this focus.

Without a tradition and rites of passage based upon some model of apprenticeship, internship, or mentoring, graduate students and new faculty are not exposed, or only minimally, to the wisdom of the elders of their academic tribes. The problem at hand is how to save the wisdom about teaching and learning of those who, largely through their own trial and

error efforts, have become good at helping students learn (which is what defines good teaching) and helping them learn how to learn; to save it in the sense of allowing for it to become opened to colleagues across the campus. The idea, as a new faculty member with his fresh Ph.D. told me of his experience in grad school, that disciplinary research is the epitome of being a professor and that good teaching is something that just comes naturally if you know your stuff, is no longer sustainable. The same person said that at his grad school as a professor in training, as long as there was no organized revolt by students against his teaching, he must be doing just fine. The idea that becoming a good teacher is both difficult and a life-long process of learning (thankfully so, for beware of “experts”) was not what his professors passed on to him. Exceptionally, after we had spoken about ways to begin his career as a new professor, he decided to visit the classes of many experienced faculty as a novice teacher learning from the more initiated and experienced ones.

Beginning by teaching in a high school and passing over the course of years from being an adjunct to a tenured professor to a faculty developer, I slowly came to realize that academics, in general, do not see teaching the way they see disciplinary scholarship. I did not either. I accepted it as the way of things that teaching was completely up to me to do with my own, inexperienced devices. For me, the decision to try to overcome my near cyberphobia and learn to use educational technologies in some discerning manner, along with an intuition that I was missing some essential aspect of the spiritual reality of teaching, led to a re-imagining of my whole work with students and to a radical change in my vision, goals and methods.

Teaching is too seldom raised among colleagues as a topic for discussion, especially if one is having a problem with some aspect of teaching, whereas talking about a problem in one’s disciplinary research is a different story and problems are understood to be stimulants for reflection and development. Faculty wise in teaching are needed to talk about their failures, problems, breakthroughs and sustaining visions. I think a community of faculty who are and always will be on vision quests for teaching is the best context for developing a professional generosity so transparent that new generations of faculty passionate for the teaching experience are generated.

Experimenting with Experiments: Wisdom Being Found

Gandhi spoke of “experiments with truth.” One way to reconceive academic culture is to think of it as an organic matrix for experiments with the truths of teaching and learning. Thus, in my role as a faculty developer, I decided to undertake some experiments in having the Faculty Center become an agent or catalyst for change, even transformation, of the culture. I knew that we would need to take risks ourselves if we were to encourage faculty, individually and collectively, to risk re-imagining teaching, learning and the academic community itself. And we had to accept that our experiments could, and some probably would, fail. But the goal was worth it and we knew that the key was not avoiding failure at all costs, but our responses to it and how the failures could be used to formulate and revise our short and long term strategic goals.

What I would like to discuss now is the keystone of that vision for preserving and communicating the faculty’s wisdom about teaching and learning and the details that emanate from that keystone.

When I became director of the Faculty Center, it had been a well established campus unit for many years, having been founded in 1988. The previous director had retired and it seemed a *kairos* moment, or opportune time, to contemplate a more encompassing trajectory for the



professional development opportunities available for faculty and to develop a continuum of opportunities that would almost ritualize the phases and stages of an academic career. I came to see the faculty and students as being the heart and soul of the university and the Faculty Center as its spirit for the faculty’s ongoing, effective and enjoyable experience of professional development. Like the lotus flower, such development blooms when there is a deep, interconnected system of growing and interacting roots among the faculty. The flower would only open if the root system were strong and steadily becoming stronger.

Continuing the analogy, I have thought that the various manifestations of the scholarship of teaching and learning are that root system and that the opening of the flower will be the opening of the faculty’s wisdom about

teaching and learning. In other words, the scholarship of teaching and learning could not only define our Faculty Center's mission and methods, but shape the academic culture of the university... if it would take root, often hidden below the surface of things. But roots do not grow upon request or by fiat.

To use a different analogy, the scholarship of teaching and learning has become like a banyan tree which sends down thin fibers to the ground. Those fibers are actually roots and they can become as pillars to support the further expansive growth of the tree as a whole. The roots are the manifestations of scholarship, contemplation and dialogue about teaching and learning. The scholarship of teaching and learning has become both our lotus and our canopy that stretches out potential roots for grounding ongoing growth.

Those experimental roots have included many things, but all of them have the intrinsic value of allowing the wisdom of the faculty to emerge as both personal AND public insight, just as teaching itself can be seen as both deeply personal and as an experience belonging to the academic community as a whole. We created electronic discussion lists for ongoing dialogue among faculty about teaching and learning topics and for new faculty about concerns particularly relevant for them. We developed a new web site that is much more of a nexus for resources, information and events. We continued our Faculty Fellows program and had a Fellow for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for the first time and initiated the Faculty Learning Communities that are formed annually around a shared interest (assessing student learning; teaching first year students; teaching, leaning & technology, etc.) and meet during the academic year. The Mentoring Program matches established faculty with newer ones.



To me, faculty are the best faculty developers of each other and in their accumulated wisdom, can deal with most of the questions and issues about teaching and learning that may arise. So I decided to start the Faculty Series on Teaching & Learning where individuals or groups of faculty give presentations or workshops to colleagues on significant topics such as a

teacher's identity, cooperative learning, service learning, problem based learning, the nature of today's students, student learning in the 1st year, plagiarism, non-evaluative observation visits to classes of colleagues, learning and teaching among the Cherokee (we are located close to the boundary or reservation of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), southern Appalachian culture, MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching), time & academic career management, etc. So far they have been well received and give faculty a non-threatening atmosphere in which to talk and listen to each other.

We also organized the Faculty Circle, a group of faculty who were recognized by their colleagues as being very enthused about teaching and concerned about working for the benefit of their students. This faculty-led group developed an initiative, the annual three day Summer Institute for Teaching & Learning. The work and social relationships developed at such events are expected to benefit in direct ways the classes of the participants and to further the dialogue about the scholarship of teaching and learning on campus.

A new Advisory Committee was created to give its collective wisdom as critique and advice. We began a "Featured Faculty" page on our web site as a way to have the campus become aware of the personal and academic backgrounds, interests and work of individual faculty, including their ideas and experiments in teaching and learning. There is an Open Classroom Project where faculty open their classes to non-evaluative, observational visits by colleagues.

An additional key way we are making the scholarship of teaching and learning spread and deepen roots is through a configuration of publications. Since 1988 a monthly opinion essay by faculty has been published, known as the *Faculty Forum*. *Notes & Quotes*, also published monthly, contains responses to that month's *Faculty Forum* piece along with Faculty Center events and teaching & learning resources. Our Faculty Fellow for Publications edits both.

There are four other publications to encourage the open expression of faculty wisdom. The *Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series* is a vehicle for faculty to write in some detail about a particular teaching and learning topic. For example, the first booklets discussed such things

as maintaining one's enthusiasm for teaching (*Setting Fires: Igniting Minds In and Out of the Classroom* by Dr. Newt Smith), the value of observing colleagues teach (*WCU Open Classroom Project: More Fun Than Getting a Big Raise*, by Dr. Terry Nienhuis) and being a part-time faculty member (*Part-Time Profession, Full-Time Passion* by Katherine Cipriano). Future ones are planned on the scholarship of teaching and learning, teaching the sciences today, cooperative learning, the problems and possibilities of being a new faculty member, teaching online, etc.



MountainRise is an electronic journal to which Western Carolina faculty can submit articles about

topics that are covered by the scholarship of teaching and learning canopy.

Suggested areas include the following:

- Explain a particular problem in teaching and/or the learning experience and, based upon one's own experience and/or research, provide a solution with justification and results and how those results are to be understood
- Analyze the problems and possibilities of interdisciplinary teaching and study
- Present a personal case study or pedagogical problem, how and why it was addressed as it was, the results, and the evaluation of those results with suggestions for further changes
- Synthesize the research of others on a significant issue and why & how that research can benefit teaching & learning
- Present original theories, teaching innovations or methods, their results and ways of evaluating those results
- Explain one's own experience and ideas about teaching & learning, how they developed, influences upon that development, reflection upon their effectiveness and possible strategies for the future
- Present a less theoretical and more inspirational discussion about the nature, role and meaning of being a teacher and of seeking to create good learning opportunities and strategies for students
- Create a teaching & learning autobiography that interprets and integrates the story of one's teaching path from its beginning to the present time
- Analyze why the scholarship of teaching & learning is valid scholarship and why it should be highly valued in a faculty member's professional

development as a teacher and in matters of annual review, promotion, tenure and post-tenure review

- Examine how and why different disciplines can approach teaching & learning differently and what may be universal about teaching & learning no matter what the discipline
- Explore any contrasts and comparisons between disciplinary scholarship and the scholarship of teaching & learning
- Explain the perspectives and expectations of WCU students today on teaching & learning based upon measured investigation, interviews, etc. and what are the reasons for and the implications of those perspectives
- A Faculty Learning Community could collaborate on a submission, focusing upon how the FLC's topic can benefit teaching & learning

Other schools have now joined *MountainRise*, making for a peer-reviewed journal:

Buffalo State College
 Dominican University
 Illinois State University
 Purdue University Calumet
 St. Olaf College
 South Dakota State University
 Southeast Missouri State University
 Western Carolina University

The Coulter Faculty Center wants to emphasize that such scholarship involves research and reflection upon one's experience and growth in wisdom as a teacher, thereby expressing why the scholarship of teaching and learning is as legitimate a form of scholarship as disciplinary research. The goal is to eventually develop *MountainRise* into a peer-reviewed ejournal open for submissions nationally and worldwide.

More tongue in cheek, but still containing the focus of creating a community of scholarly and experiential wisdom about teaching, we began a quarterly newsletter, *The Buzzard's Roost Road Review*, named after the street outside the Center. *BR3*, as we affectionately call it, is a reminder that teaching and learning are not to be taken with a terminal solemnity and that wisdom about teaching, as with any wisdom, includes

a good amount of humor. The first issue contained this quote: "Learning is at its best when it is deadly serious and very playful at the same time," (Sarah Lightfoot). And in academic life there is really no shortage of opportunities for us to make light of ourselves. As Chesterton said, "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly; devils fall because of their gravity." We are not angels, but we do not have to be devils of terminal solemnity.

The Teaching Quest is a newsletter for new faculty that is published once a semester to present resources and opportunities for new faculty to engage in professional development as they begin or continue their careers. A section of the newsletter features some of the new faculty and their backgrounds and views of teaching and learning.

I would like to mention a project in the planning, but one that manifests in total the central idea of this essay. The project is the Wisdom Project and is based upon the idea that one's career in teaching gradually writes a story, a kind of teaching autobiography. Plans for the project include meeting each year, individually and collectively, with retiring faculty to allow them to tell their stories of teaching, their ideas for improvement, what they are glad they did and what they wish they had done, etc. The Project will ask them to leave an oral and written narrative of their teaching career for others to read, especially younger faculty. Such interviews and discussions, and classes they teach, will be recorded and preserved. It is hope to create the text for a print or hypertext book based upon a gleaning of the wisdom from such teaching stories.

Perhaps one of the best legacies a faculty member can leave to her or his university, besides the years and decades of commitment to students and their learning, would be written and oral stories of their lives as teachers (and learners) and what they have learned about teaching. It could be the mining (and minding) of wisdom to give to young, junior, even other senior faculty. Teaching is and creates a story and as Muriel Rukeyser said, "The universe is made up of stories, not of atoms." Stories often contain and express the hidden values and hopes by which we live, as teachers and as human beings.

Conclusion: Wisdom Being Lived and Loved

The preserving of the faculty's wisdom about teaching can only have meaning where such wisdom is both loved and valued and where the love of teaching and learning has been a ritual of life. Augustine said "What I live by, I impart." When working with students is a loved event and one never loses a "holy curiosity" (Einstein), it is a story that aches to be allowed to become part of the community of learning. Wisdom and love become one and teaching becomes seen as a craft, but also as a spirited art, a work of human poetry. It was Plato who said that "At the touch of love everyone becomes a poet." Love for teaching allows teaching to be one's poetry.

To put it more dramatically, teaching and its wisdom are a *mythos*, or story, by which teachers live. What may at times be forgotten in academic life is that teaching and learning are foundational human and spiritual events and experiences that flourish best when teaching is understood as not only technique and goals and outcomes, but as historically and culturally a universal process that can be found in myths around the world.

The growing into wisdom about teaching is as a vision quest that demands that the recipient of the vision allow it to be known to the community in which the vision grew. A good myth includes this stage of reincorporation or return home to live out and give out the meanings received along the journey, especially to those not yet, or just beginning, their separation from what is safe and familiar in order to risk their dreamtimes and face the (largely inner) obstacles and beasts that block the passage. Just as "education" comes from a root word, *educere*, meaning to lead or draw out, wise teachers can seek to draw wisdom out from colleagues, especially when those colleagues are not fully aware of what they already know and understand, or have not formulated it into stories.

Carl Jung wrote, "I suspected that myth had a meaning which I was sure to miss if I lived outside it... I was driven to ask myself in all seriousness: 'What is the myth you are living?' I found no answer... So I took it upon myself to get to know my 'myth', and I regarded this as the task of tasks." Getting to know the story of one's teaching is the task and the wisdom. Being willing to let colleagues know that story seeds the wisdom in one's wake and remembers the future.

What is wonderful about wisdom is that it both elusive and enchanting, hidden and obvious. It is an ocean of truth about teaching where “the farther you enter into truth, the deeper it is” (Bankei). Wise teachers are not “experts” to inform others, but those who have traveled the geography and have constructed some compelling story-maps. Their wisdom does not separate, but unites.

What Thomas Merton said about spiritual development can apply to the waymaking and pathfinding of teaching: “We are all beginners, but some are just more beginners than others.” Lost wisdom about teaching needs to come home again.

*We must receive new seeds from an old harvest
Old truths out of a time newborn.*

- Merton



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Biographical Information

After attending many colleges, writing many poems and a couple novels, editing and publishing a small magazine of poetry, working in factories, a farm, hotel, plant nursery, lawn maintenance, and religious education, I began a teaching career as an adjunct instructor in Florida at Edison Community College and for the Adult & Continuing Ed Program of Barry University. I became a professor of religious studies at Marshall University in West Virginia before becoming the director of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning at Western Carolina University in the ancient mountains of western North Carolina.

Surprising as it still is to me and never to be taken for granted, I have a beautiful wife and two great children. There is much more wisdom to learn in being a husband and father, than I can know.

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The Altany's